

## **Policy Issues in the requested zoning map amendment**

November 19, 2020

The staff report for the zoning map amendment frames the issue in terms of allowing the student residence hall project to proceed, but rezoning these parcels raises important policy issues for the city which have not been considered in the packet materials, but must be addressed by the City Council.

Generally, the Ole Avenue project is an exciting one; it replaces the inefficient land use of the honor houses with higher density, purpose-built student residences. The proposed dormitories serve the college's mission of being a residential college and limit the impact of student life and traffic on the surrounding neighborhood by bringing students back on campus. The development will create an attractive and more decisive gateway to the campus distinct from the town.

Beyond the project, the requested map amendment is the opportunity to consider critically important for development on the west side of the City. The Planning Commission should (1) discuss the policy issues below, (2) include this memo and additional comments with our recommendation, and (2) recommend approval of the map amendment with the condition that a joint land use and transportation planning body be created to draft a formal shared plan for the campus edge addressing these concerns.

- **The Planning Commission is directed to evaluate the application according to these criteria (LDC 8.5.14(C)).**
  - The specific policies, goals, objectives, and recommendations of the comprehensive plan and other city plans, including public facilities and the capital improvement plans.
  - The purpose and intent of this LDC, or in the case of a map amendment, whether it meets the purpose and intent of the individual district.
  - The adequacy of a buffer or transition provided between potentially incompatible districts.
- **Zoning map amendments should be seen at the city and zoning district level, not parcel level,** as the criteria make clear. Rezoning is not just a different flavor of variance, but is a major policy decision to guide future development in a different direction from is currently mapped.
- **Amending the zoning districts on the map alters what happens on both sides of the line.** In this case, the effect is closer to an annexation where St Olaf expands its boundaries and limits city control. The transition between districts affects what St. Olaf can do on the campus and impacts the housing supply and neighborhood features on the City side.
- **The requested change redefines the eastern edge of the St Olaf campus.** In effect, the Ole Avenue project moves the “city limit” of St Olaf by removing the Honor Houses which were still in the single-family built form of the neighborhood and will replace them with institutional buildings of much higher density and campus character.
- Both the College and the City have interests in the action before us and in possible future actions

- **Northfield's policy is to preserve its historic neighborhoods characterized by the grid street pattern and a mix of housing sizes and styles;** expanding the campus creates potential conflicts with this goal as stated in the purpose statement of the R1 zoning district which currently exists: "The primary intent of this zone is to strengthen the character of existing historic neighborhoods within Northfield and to protect and enhance the unique character of those existing neighborhoods, particularly in locations where this character may be most susceptible to change."
- **St. Olaf College has changed the character of the area without requesting a zoning map amendment.** The College has acquired the majority of the property on the west side of Lincoln Street and stated an intent in its 2016 framework plan to acquire the remaining homes as they become available. Northfield struggles with this de facto zoning near both colleges because of the lack of transparency and predictability for both nearby residents and the City's planning efforts.
- **Northfield has a strong interest in establishing a firm boundary for the campus at the interface with neighborhoods,** especially when St Olaf has substantial land holdings which do not impact current city neighborhoods for future expansion.
- **Climate Action plans must be considered:** Adding the large amount of parking, service roads, and lighting shown on the site plan is a significant change which affects the neighborhood beyond the new zoning. As the City and College consider the edge of campus, looking to our Climate Action Plan and bike and walk planning to limit the surface parking, light pollution, and motorized vehicle traffic is critical.
- **Campus expansion impacts Northfield's capital planning and the city's mobility options.** Working with the College to understand future expansion, consider how best to improve bike/walk infrastructure, and link the campus to the City in safe and attractive ways is critical. The traffic study for this project suggests changes such as "Northfield should consider installing and maintaining pedestrian and bicycle facilities in accordance with its current City of Northfield Pedestrian, Bike, and Trail System report and the City of Northfield Americans with Disabilities Act Pedestrian Facilities Transition Plan." Rather Northfield and St. Olaf should jointly plan and phase improvements which serve both entities' transportation, climate action, and financial goals.